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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 001376

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SUBJECT: CZECH REPUBLIC: AMBASSADOR'S COURTESY CALLS ON
HEADS OF SENATE AND CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Gruber for reasons 1.4 b+d

¶1. SUMMARY. (SBU) Ambassador Gruber paid courtesy calls on the heads of the upper and lower chambers of the Czech legislature on November 1. The two men, through from rival political parties on opposite sides of the political spectrum, shared similar views on foreign policy issues of interest to the United States, such as missile defense and foreign deployments, but differed significantly on the best way out of the ongoing political stalemate in the Czech Republic. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) On November 1, Ambassador Gruber met separately with Premysl Sobotka, Civic Democrat (ODS) President of the Czech Senate, and Miloslav Vlcek, Social Democrat (CSSD) Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. Sobotka, a Senator for ten years, has been President of the Senate since December 2004 (and is very likely to be returned to the position when the Senate convenes next month with the members elected to the third of Senate seats that were contested in last month's election). Vlcek, on the other hand, was only made Speaker on August 14 of this year and has already promised to step down should his party succeed in forming the next government, or should any other party fail in the next attempt. The bookshelves in Vlcek's office were bare. His office, though grand, looked as though he had not moved in yet.

¶3. (C) In discussions on the possible hosting of elements of the U.S. missile defense system, both leaders made the point that Czech public opinion needs to be better managed. Sobotka said that he would personally welcome a U.S. facility, but that the public and the media are opposed and need to be shown why the system is of benefit to the Czech Republic. Sobotka believes a referendum on the issue is not needed, pointing out that the nation did not hold a referendum on NATO membership. He said a simple majority in both houses would be sufficient to approve an installation, but that the issue will continue to be sensitive to politicians of all stripes if the nation heads towards early elections.

¶4. (C) Vlcek echoed that sensitivity, claiming that the issue could not have come at a less convenient time because some parties were trying to exploit the issue ahead of the recent elections. He said CSSD wanted to link the issue to a referendum. But Vlcek, echoing CSSD Chair Paroubek, stated that if the USG offers only a radar facility, "then a referendum is not needed." He also stressed that many Czechs still clearly remember the unpleasant experiences of Soviet occupation. He believes that this explains some of the public skepticism about a missile defense facility, and also the public sense that the government might be "cooking something up without the people knowing about it." Vlcek was

even-handed in saying both the United States and the Czechs could have done a better job with public relations, noting that a more transparent discussion to date would have reduced some of the skepticism and misinformation. Vlcek concluded by stating that "if we make the proper arguments, we can get a good result. If I am still Speaker when the U.S. decision is made, I will do what I can to help."

¶ 15. (SBU) Vlcek also said the CSSD parliamentary caucus supports the fight against terrorism, including the deployments in Iraq, and the promotion of democracy in places such as Belarus and Burma.

¶ 16. (U) Sobotka was the only one of the two to raise the visa issue, which he called "a priority." He said, though a small issue, it is one of great symbolic importance to the Czech people. Sobotka said he is working on a bill that would allow Czech citizens to retain expired passports and use the valid visas within. (Thousands of Czechs who still have valid American visas have to apply for new visas each year because the Czech government requires that they turn in the expiring passport when applying for a new one. A similar bill failed in the previous parliament when it was bundled along with other legislation.) Sobotka said he thought the drafting of the new bill could begin in January or February of 2007.

¶ 17. (U) The one issue on which the two political figures differed was the question of how to break the current political deadlock. Sobotka (ODS) argued that the Czech electorate had sent a clear signal -- initially in the June general election and later, more strongly, in October's municipal and Senate polls -- that they want a center-right government. Sobotka said an early election in 2007 is the only way to definitively settle the impasse.

PRAGUE 00001376 002 OF 002

¶ 18. (SBU) Vlcek, on the other hand, said he thought the problem would be resolved "in a month," and listed three possible scenarios, the first two of which did not include elections next year. He thought a CSSD minority government, a grand coalition with ODS, or a caretaker government were all possible. On the subject of early elections, Vlcek said that a bill introduced by Senate President Sobotka that would alter the Constitution to facilitate the dissolution of parliament was "interference" since it would go against the intent of those who wrote the Constitution. He believes the only path to early elections lies in the collapse of three successive governments. He repeated his promise to resign if the second government attempt were not successful. Vlcek also made the argument that elections are costly. He estimated that another general election would cost the nation more than 1.5 billion crowns (\$67 million) at a time when the government is doing all it can to cut costs.

GRABER